

“When the tree has blossomed fully . . .”

Reflections on the Church

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The Second Vatican Council presented a vision of the church particularly suited to contemporary times. The authors propose that a seminal text of Chiara Lubich, “Look at All the Flowers,” suggests how the Council’s vision can be realized through mutual personal relationships that reflect the very life of the Trinity. The model of such relationships and therefore of the Christian community and of the church itself is Mary at the foot of the Cross, who “lost” the God in herself for the God who is present or will be present in every human being, then and now. “Look at All the Flowers” demonstrates how that Marian profile can be lived out individually, in local communities, and in the church so as

to generate living cells of the Mystical Body, renewing both church and society. Two icons, from the Church of the Savior in Constantinople and from San Clemente in Rome, demonstrate this dynamic relationship between the personal, the ecclesial, and the secular.

“In our day, what has happened to that hidden energy of the Good News, which is able to have a powerful effect on man’s conscience? To what extent and in what way is that evangelical force capable of really transforming the people of this century? What methods should be followed in order that the power of the Gospel may have its effect? Basically, these inquiries make explicit the fundamental question that the Church is asking herself today and which may be expressed in the following terms: after the Council and thanks to the Council, which was a time given her by God, at this turning-point of history, does the Church or does she not find herself better equipped to proclaim the Gospel and to put it into people’s hearts with conviction, freedom of spirit and effectiveness?”¹

These words, written by Pope Paul VI ten years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, are still relevant fifty years after the opening of the Council. They provide a clear indication of how to interpret the Council: it wasn’t just about the publication of a series of documents to be put into practice, but about letting the event of Christ and his gospel become present anew in the world.

1. Pope Paul VI’s Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Modern World, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), n. 4.

In the 1960s the Second Vatican Council seemed promising. As former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams commented in October 2012, it “laid out a fresh and joyful vision of how the unchanging reality of Christ living in his Body on earth through the gift of the Holy Spirit might speak in new words to the society of our age and even to those of other faiths.”²

With its reform in continuity, the Council presented a dynamic vision of the church: the People of God journeying in history as the “seed” and “beginning” of the Kingdom, the “seed of unity, hope and salvation” (see *Lumen gentium* 5 and 9) that spreads within humanity relationships of mutual giving and receiving rooted in and modeled upon the life of the three divine Persons disclosed to us in Jesus Christ (see *Gaudium et spes* 24).

Fifty years after the Council we realize the task is not easy! With ever new challenges both within the church³ and within society, we could easily be tempted either to conform without critical discernment to today’s mentality, or else to try and return to the certainty of other times, closing ourselves within a realm of the sacred that is detached from history. But the church, as Pope Francis keeps reminding us, is called to go outside itself to the “existential outskirts.”⁴

2. See Archbishop Rowan Williams’ address to the Synod of Bishops on the “New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith,” Vatican, October 10, 2012.

3. In referring to “the church” we have in mind not only the Catholic Church but the church of Christ as a whole. See the recent ecumenical document published by Faith and Order, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2013).

4. See for instance Pope Francis’ address to the Leadership of CELAM, Rio de Janeiro, July 28, 2013. Pope Benedict XVI also affirmed something similar in *Caritas in Veritate*: “Being at God’s service, is at the service of the world in terms of love and truth . . . promoting the full development of humankind” (n.11).

What Chiara Lubich outlines in “Look at All the Flowers” is an invitation to pursue this pathway; in other words, in order to be in God’s service we need to go out to our neighbor.⁵ And not simply to help our neighbor, but to let the Kingdom of God occur among us, to let Jesus Christ’s dynamic and transforming presence be among us in interpersonal relationships and in the whole of human history. For that to come about we need to “set God aside,” as it were, God in oneself—as Chiara explains in the central part of the text—in order to discover him and bring him to light in others.

We won’t linger here on this point at this stage. Rather, we would like to focus on the final part of the text.

And when the tree has blossomed fully—when the Mystical Body will have been completely revived—it will reflect the seed whence it was born. It will be one, because all the flowers will be one among themselves just as each is one with itself.

Christ is the seed. The Mystical Body is the foliage.

Christ is the Father to the tree: he was never so much Father as during his forsakenness where he generated us as his children; in his forsakenness where he annihilated himself remaining: God.

The Father is root to the Son. The Son is seed to his brothers and sisters.

5. See John Paul II’s statement in his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*: “Man is the way of the Church” (n. 14).

And it was the Desolate who, in her silent consent to being Mother of other children, cast this seed in Heaven and the tree blossomed and continuously blossoms on earth.

Given its dense and strongly mystical character, this text is difficult to understand. But we believe that in reading it attentively, referring also to other texts from Chiara Lubich as well as to scripture, it has much to say concerning the life and journey of the church for the period of history in which we are living.

Christ is the seed. The Mystical Body is the foliage [of the tree].

Other texts from Paradise '49⁶ help us understand that when Chiara writes of “Mystical Body” here she is thinking not so much of the church as of the whole of humanity that has already been reached by Christ in his forsakenness, death, and resurrection.⁷ Following the logic of the text, humanity is called to “blossom,” or, in terms found in the *Letter to the Ephesians*, to grow towards the full maturity of Christ (see Eph 4:13). In other words, it is called to make its own and live the dynamic of giving that we find in the life of Christ, a giving right to the point of self-emptying (*kenosis*—see Phil 2), not only in relation to God, but also in mutual relationships among people. “To blossom” means that because of Christ (who is the “seed”) and through the gift of his

6. Paradise '49 refers to a period of illumination in the life of Chiara Lubich that began in the summer of 1949. Some of the texts have been published but only a few at this point in time. “Look at All the Flowers” is one such text.

7. See *Gaudium et Spes* 22: “For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. . . . [W]e ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.” See also *LG* 13–16.

Spirit, to establish at all levels and ever more deeply, relationships of unity and distinction that overcome our indifference and inability to communicate as well as the negative dialectical conflicts that so often characterize our life together as human beings. It’s a question of letting this blossoming happen (as much as is possible for us human beings) in our mutual relationships. In other words, the life of the three divine Persons where each One in full freedom lives *with* the Other, *for* the Other, *in* the Other (see Jn 14–17). As the text states:

And when the tree has blossomed fully—when the Mystical Body will have been completely revived—it will reflect the seed whence it was born. It will be one, because all the flowers will be one among themselves just as each is one with itself.

The origin of and condition for this “blossoming” of humanity, as the rest of the text makes clear, is the decomposing of the “seed,” in other words, the forsakenness of the Son by the Father. Paradoxically, it was precisely in his total human self-emptying and in losing his sense of being God that the Son became “Father” of humanity, filling it with his life of God! He empties himself and yet “remains God,” present on earth now not only as the “seed” but as the firstborn among many brothers and sisters (see Rom 8:26; Heb 1:6) who form with him and in him one Body (see Col 1:18; Eph 4:11–16; 1 Cor 12:12; Rom 12:4–5):

Christ is the Father of the tree: he was never so much Father as during his forsakenness where he generated us as his children; in his forsakenness where he annihilated himself remaining: God.

The Father is root to the Son. The Son is seed to his brothers and sisters.

At this point we might ask: between Christ who is the “seed” and humanity as the “foliage” called to “blossom” at all levels in relationships that are not competitive or conflictual but rather “Trinitarian,” that is, relationships marked by sharing and communication, what is the place and role of the church? It seems to us that the text we are studying responds in a very succinct manner with the following statement:

And it was the Desolate who, in her silent consent to being Mother of other children, cast this seed in Heaven and the tree blossomed and continuously blossoms on earth.

Let’s explore this statement that at first glance is rather mysterious. Let’s take it step by step, concentrating above all on two crucial moments in the life of Mary, the Mother of the Word Incarnate:

- the moment of the Annunciation when, with her “yes,” Mary receives the Word as the divine “seed” and gives him human flesh (see Lk 1:38).
- the moment at the foot of the Cross when, with a new “yes”—the “silent consent” as Chiara puts it—Mary accepts that her God-Son “disincarnates” himself, if we can put it like that, from his particular flesh to take on the flesh of humanity.⁸

8. This expression occurs in Paradise 49 and refers to Jesus forsaken. In a footnote Chiara comments: “Just as the Word in Jesus became incarnate, so I say that the Word

It’s interesting the note the images Chiara uses to describe that moment. At the foot of the Cross, Mary, who had received the Word in her womb and given him flesh, “cast this seed in heaven”—in other words, she gave back to God the Son she had conceived, receiving instead John and in him humanity, becoming “Mother of other children.” It is with this, her “silent consent,” that the divine life force—the Spirit—that comes from the “Root” (the Father) pours upon the “flesh” of humanity and shapes humanity according to the Easter life of Christ making it blossom in “Trinitarian” relationships. In our view, this is a key to understanding both how Mary is model of the church and also the Marian profile of the church, which John Paul II saw as “the deepest contents of the conciliar renewal.”⁹

The church, in its totality and in each member, is involved in the generation of a renewed and reconciled humanity, one characterized by solidarity. It does so following the example of Mary

in Jesus Forsaken ‘disincarnates himself’ in order to express the reality of what is the culmination of death, forsakenness. In other words, I see something like a disincarnation in the moment when he cries out ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mk 15:34), as if God were detached from man in Jesus.” The theologian S.N. Bulgakov has said something similar: “The Incarnate Son, in his death, forcibly disincarnated himself, as it were . . .” (*Agnello di Dio* [Rome: Città Nuova, 1990], 383). This does not mean—as some of the Gnostics proposed—that the Word of the Second Person of the Trinity was distant from what Jesus was living on the Cross. Rather, here the sense is rather a radicalization of the Incarnation.

9. See John Paul II’s Catechesis on the Signs of the Times at the General Audience of November 25, 1998. See also his *Address to the Cardinals of the Roman Curia*, December 22, 1987; Benedict XVI, *Homily on the 40th Anniversary of the Conclusion of the Second Vatican Council* (December 8, 2005) and *Homily at the Mass with New Cardinals* (March 25, 2006). See further Brendan Leahy, *The Marian Profile of the Church* (New York: New City, 2000), and Hubertus Blaumeiser and Brendan Leahy, “Prospettive ecclesilogiche a partire da “Gesù in mezzo,” in Michel Vandeleene, ed., *Egli è vivo: La presenza del risorto nella comunità cristiana* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2006), 103–129; in particular, 114–122.

at the foot of the Cross. On the one hand, the church is to receive Christ as the divine “seed” that becomes “flesh” in her through the Word and sacraments. On the other hand, however, the church is called to cast that seed “in heaven” in order to become “mother” of other children; called, that is, to lose God in herself for God present, or to be born, in every man and woman in this world. In other words, the church is not to be closed in on herself possessing the treasures of grace that she has conceived, as if owning them, but rather she is to open up and go out towards humanity outside herself.

The Christian community as a whole and in each part is called to be an open and living space in which the kenotic love of Christ, his self-giving to the point of forsakenness, reaches humanity in a concrete-historical way, shaping it with this love. To become the space, in other words, in which, through mutual love lived according to the measure of Jesus, the form and the very way of being of Christ and of the uni-Triune God becomes visible and operative.

Where the church lives like this it becomes the “womb” in which the Spirit of the Crucified and Risen Christ, in a concrete communitarian context, shapes new men and women who have the form of Christ and of his way of being and acting. Because of a church that is “extrovert” in this sense, directed towards God and towards humanity, the tree of humanity in its many expressions can “blossom” on earth in a way of relating that is no longer exclusive or conflictual but inclusive and participative—in short, “Trinitarian.”

The courageous and new step that the church is being called to take is to re-live Mary’s “yes” at the foot of the Cross in the sense outlined above. The text under consideration, “Look at all the Flowers,” indicates various ways for that to happen:

- On the *individual* level, it’s a matter of “losing God in oneself for God in one’s brothers and sisters,” that is, of going beyond a search for God that is primarily individual to live an experience of God also in relationship, and ultimately, in society as a whole. The focus, that is, is on Christ not only in the individual but among people, Christ in the midst of us, building up the exterior castle.
- Similarly, in terms of *each aspect, charism and state of life, parish or religious community of the church*, it’s a question of finding identity by going outside oneself and welcoming others. This is a vital point if we want to be able to reach a deeper and more effective realization of the church as the People of God in communion. It is vital to achieving a true sense of synodality with all the levels of participation and co-responsibility that this requires. “In order to be engrafted . . . upon the other, just as the Persons of the Trinity, we must lose even God (in us, for God) in our brother/sister. Just like Jesus Forsaken who lost God in (loving) the brother.”¹⁰
- A third point has to do with *the mission of the church in the world*. Mission can be understood as expressing and communicating the life of Christ, by placing oneself, in the Spirit of his kenotic love, in an attitude of listening and welcoming that enables God to manifest himself in each person, culture, and religion, thereby expanding the spaces in which the presence of the Risen Crucified Christ and his Spirit emerges. It is a presence that draws humanity into the life of mutual giving. This brings about a manner

10. Unpublished text of the Spring of 1950.

of living and of inculturation of the church that paves the way for the explicit proclamation of the truth of the gospel.

But there is another indication provided by the text. Chiara draws our attention to a particular “place,” or more precisely a “way,” where all of this can and must happen: between two or three who, losing themselves in one another in a relationship of mutual love and being consumed in one form a “living cell of the Mystical Body of Christ.” Such cells are capable of gradually reviving the whole Body, the community of the church and, ultimately, the whole of humanity. It is around such cells in which the Forsaken-Risen Christ releases his kenotic and uniting love, both in the relationships within these cells and in the outreach to others, that the fabric of humanity blossoms. In other words, humanity is “Trinitized,” social relations are established, relationships of unity and distinction to the point of mutual immanence.¹¹

The way that Chiara lays out for achieving this is a continuous going “beyond,” beyond the confines of one’s own identity, beyond that of one’s own community, beyond every experience of unity with God and others, beyond the church, in order to be projected towards humanity in an all-around dialogue of life that is not dispersion but rather a way to create ever broader spaces of Trinitarian relationships.

11. See also a comment of Chiara Lubich’s: “God wants from us that . . . everywhere we bring to life living cells, with Christ in our midst; cells that are ever more ardent, ever more numerous. God wants from us that we light bigger and bigger fires in families, in offices, in factories, in schools, in parishes, in monasteries and convents, to feed the blaze of the love of God in the Church and in society” (*The Key to Unity* [London: New City, 1985], 39). A similar idea is voiced today in many parts of the world in the various forms of small Christian communities. See *Gen’s* 49 (2009): 3.

As we noted above, it seems this is the step being asked of the church and of every believer. By way of conclusion, we could like to summarize what we have said in iconic form using two images.

The first image comes from the Church of the Savior in Constantinople. The church is called “in Chora,” that is, in the countryside. Above the portal of the ancient Byzantine church there is a depiction of Mary Mother of God (*Theotokos*) with the inscription: “The Ground of the Uncontainable” (in Greek: *chora tou achoretou*). This can be translated also as “The Womb that Contains the Uncontainable.” The reference is clearly to the moment of the Incarnation when Mary received the Word in its making itself little, a “seed.” It is significant, however, that this image is placed right over the exit of the church, as the last thing believers see as they leave the sacred building. It’s as if to say to them: Just like me, you are called to be “the womb of the Uncontainable,” you are called to receive Christ and nourish him with your humanity. But then also—and this is the new step—to remind you that he is the “Uncontainable,” the One who cannot be kept closed within you but must go outside and shape the reality around you, that is, shape social, political, and economic relationships. The seed that, in dying, releases all its uncontainable Life by losing it, the Life that is already, in a hidden manner, present in all of creation awaiting to find the conditions for it to sprout and blossom in all of creation.

The other image is the tree of life depicted in the mosaic in the apse of the Church of San Clemente in Rome. The Crucified Christ is at the center. From him flow rivers of living water—the Spirit—that spray all created reality, depicted both as nature, with plants and animals, and as cultures depicted in symbols that refer to various human activities. Above the Crucified Christ is



Picture by Dick Osseman.

the hand of God the Father, the One who is the “Root” of the Son. On the left we see Bethlehem and on the right, Jerusalem, the city-symbol of a Trinitarian sociality that is to be lived out throughout the whole of humanity.

Those looking at this mosaic might ask—but where is the church depicted in this mosaic? On the one hand, it is simply the space, the background, the womb in which all of this happens, as depicted in Mary together with John. With her “silent consent” and with her sharing in the event of the Crucified Christ, she lets all of this happen. On the other hand, the church is present in the twelve white doves depicted on the tree of the Cross, representing the Twelve Apostles. It is there, on the Cross and around the Cross, that the ordained ministers and all the baptized can draw

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continually upon the source of Easter-Trinitarian relationality, that they are called to witness to and bring about in humanity.

To move continuously from the first image to the second, in a constant movement from the religious and ecclesial sphere to the vast sphere of humanity in its secular nature—this is the step which the People of God is called to take and for which a text such as “Look at All the Flowers” offers important pointers.

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